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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

TWO TRAGIC COMEDIANS¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

It was Roger Huncote's notion (although he did not thus phrase it to himself) that literature should keep pace with love. So it is not difficult to understand that when, after an evening spent in reading to his young wife Sue from the poetry of Blake and Herrick and Whitman and Swinburne, she answered to his exalted mood by reciting for him *The Wreck of the Raspberry Jam*, Huncote should have lost his patience, his temper, his manners and, alas, some of his love. For Sue, though her lips showed darkly and tenderly sensuous against the pale honey of her skin; though her eyes were like port when no light shines through it: nevertheless, Sue was (and the fact, as you will see, remained ineluctable) the daughter of a washwoman.

You are to figure them in the drawing-room at Pembroke Square. It is a hot July night. Sue, wrapped in her brooding loveliness, sits in shadow against the bright chintzes on the sofa. There is dusk in the room, interrupted only by a strip of moonlight across the floor, and the shaded lamp, a miniature sun eclipsed by the black shadow of Roger's profile—a fine, English profile, aggressively well-bred, you may be sure. The warm and intimate stillness (a stillness drenched in beauty and vaguely articulate with high thought and subdued emotion) is broken only by Roger's voice: an English voice, the voice of Oxford and of three thousand pounds a year. He is reciting from the masters who are dearest to him. From Blake, for example, he reads:

Holy and cold, I clipped the wings
Of all sublunary things. . . .

¹ *The Strangers' Wedding*. By W. L. George. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1916.

It had been his plan to lead Sue by easy stages into his own intellectual world: in verse, for instance, they might "begin with Tennyson and then by degrees get on to poetry." But now he had quite forgotten his pupil. Hypnotized by the incantations of the verse he loved, he dragged the bewildered novice through Blake's fantastic and jeweled gateways and into his blinding paradise of terrible angels and anonymous midnight noons. He dipped into Swinburne, and, growing venturesome, into Whitman—Whitman, it is to be feared, in his ungirdled moments: for to Sue, buttressed by the infrangible prudery of her class, this was "not quite proper." But Roger wanted to move her, to make her articulate. He questioned her, probed her reactions, spurred her to comment and response. So Sue responded, finally, by reciting some poetry that she had liked and learned by heart. It was *The Wreck of the Raspberry Jam*. She could not remember it all, but she spoke a bit of it:

One chap was discoursing on Darwin, and said:

"The professor was right through and through.

We *did* spring from monkeys." Another one said:

"I believe it when I look at *you*."

Do you wonder that Roger was chilled to his depths, chilled beyond re-kindling? It seemed to him dreadful that she should react in such a way; and he reproached her bitterly for reciting vulgar and cockney verse. It was not only that they differed about poetry; it was not only because they found themselves entirely parted by their tastes: it was because they stood revealed to each other as essential strangers. They faced each other, silent and inimical, incurably at odds: one could not compromise between Blake and *The Wreck of the Raspberry Jam*. To Roger, who thought that spirit and intellect should accord with the transports of love and of the senses, it was a tragedy of horrible seriousness. To Sue, who in these passionate differences saw an assumption of superiority, it was profoundly humiliating; for though she was proud of his superiority, he must not make her aware of it.

Roger, you will perceive, was hardly the man to espouse a daughter of the slums. His parents, says his cool-eyed historian, "gave him a first-class education and he never got over it." He was that fragile product of his class and time—an "intellectual" without tolerance or essential humor, and

he believed that aesthetic breeding was the root of refinement. Restless, sufficiently rich, nebulously humanitarian, a fastidious voluptuary; an enthusiast who takes up settlement work from the noblest of motives, and yet who winces when he hears a lecturer before the Mutual Improvement Society refer to Carlyle as "the sage of Chelsea": this, clearly, is a young man primed for tragi-comedy.

He should, of course, have been warned by the awful green coat and the still more awful slum hat, swarming with roses, worn by the lovely Miss Groby the day he saw her at the settlement picnic; he should have been warned by the ominous vision of Mrs. Groby, washing blouses and lace in her three small rooms on Paradise Row, St. Panwich's. But he was conscious only of Sue's dark beauty and the dusky intimacy of her, the rich blackness of her hair with the brown shadows in its waves, the sensitive nose, the mellow soft gold of her cheek where the sun touched it through the leaves, the slender hips, the long and fine arms, the young, full breasts that rose and fell with her hurried breathing, pointing to right and left, delicately virginal, reminding him of "a fleeing Diana," and speaking to him more of pathos than of seduction. With parted, upturned lips and an air of supplication, she seemed to him to personify the appeal of her class—the appeal for an enlightenment, a rescue which he might achieve. He was Perseus, and she Andromeda. And later, on their way home in the bus, he saw a quality he had not known before in the softness of her side-long look—"the love-look, humid and brilliant, shy and gay": a look that made him think that "on a windless night the tide was rising on a sandy beach, the moon shining for a moment through the thin pale waters of a flat wave." For Huncote, as you may already have discerned, was one of those who, as Mr. Meredith has told us in a certain instance, "fiddle harmonics on the strings of sensualism." His reason forced him to remember that Sue was coarse; that she was uneducated; that she was common: but not vulgar, nor cruel, nor insensitive like so many of her class. And he would, and could, reclaim her—he had a glad vision of her with only three roses in her hat instead of twelve: with perhaps, even, just a black aigrette; a Sue with all her "h's" complete; a Sue who no longer said "didn't orter" and "them things." He would take her to the National Gallery—or perhaps they would begin with the Tate. She must read a bit, too, instead

of merely looking at the pictures in the paper. She should proceed, via Dickens, possibly even unto Meredith. And music . . . beginning with the popular concerts, going on to *Carmen* and the "1812" Overture, and necessarily, too, traversing the sentimental purgatory of *Bohème* (which Roger privately regarded as "embodying the passions of a literary hairdresser"—for he was a very modern young man, and thought himself upon familiar terms with Debussy and Vincent d'Indy and Stravinsky).

And so (in the classic words of the Great Panjandrum) they were married, and went to Biarritz on their honeymoon. Here there were wonderful hours, by turns enkindling and narcotic—hours of linked sweetness long and delicious, when she fired him and delighted him, and yet seemed strange to him; and he pitied her a little: "Sue in Biarritz—what an exile!" (She had wanted to go to Ramsgate). It disturbed him somewhat—disturbed him aesthetically—that one day she developed indigestion. This was a dissonance—indigestion upon one's honeymoon was hardly romantic; and in Sue's case it made her nose red. And she distressed him further by her appetite, as, in imagination, he saw her beauty vanish—until he remembered that all her life she probably had never had quite enough to eat. And yet he loved her very much, his reason and his intuition dream-held by the transfiguring magic of his passion: so that, when they lay in the warm night upon a cliff, and he asked her if she did not think the moon was beautiful ("look how she blushes—is that because I have kissed you and it makes her shy?"), and Sue merely laughed and came closer to him, and murmured: "When she's red like that, it means rain"—even then, though for a moment he was cooled and repelled, he saw something in her eyes that wiped out all intellectual difference; and he stifled his thoughts, and the beginning of a great dread, in the cloudy incense of his passion, seeking uneasily that most treacherous of anesthetics, an erotic hallucination.

But he had married her thinking that between them there were, or would grow up, tastes and sympathies, when there were only caresses. He had not realized that it would seem insupportable to him when a postcard came from Sue's brother showing an oppressed husband carrying triplets and a feeding-bottle, while a gross and angry wife hovered over him with a poker; for when Sue saw it she laughed and seemed unconscious of offence. He had not known how it

would hurt him, as something cheap and soiling, when, as he kissed her one time, she suddenly held him tight and said: "Let's play lemonade—I'll be the lemon, and you be the squeezer"; for he neither understood nor could tolerate that attitude of the proletariat which regards love as legitimate material for low comedy: he did not understand that "at a word, if he only chose it well, the mask of comedy would fall, and under it he would find the serious mouth and veiled eyes of the love he sought."

Worse, much worse, came after. Sue, while in a state of somnambulism, had stumbled into a new world: she awoke and was lost. "In the new world she found a strange people that ate differently, who had endless clothes for occasions that she could not understand, mysterious games—golfing, hunting . . . strange people indeed." She could not understand why Roger was furious with her when she gave two-pence to some furniture movers as a tip for delivering and unpacking a huge chest. She decked herself out for a dinner party with all the rings and necklaces and bracelets she possessed, and then ran upstairs and took them off to spare the feelings of the other women—poorer or less beloved, she thought—who were not thus adorned. She annoyed him, shocked him, mortified him, at every turn. "These little things, they go on all the time," he cried miserably to the perceptive Theresa Underwood (who, being of his own delicately endowed class, was privileged to permit him to make love to her); "it seems so small, but it goes on and on: little bits of shame, little bits of irritation, little bits of despair falling upon our marriage like the drops of water that wear away a stone" (though how the fastidious Roger could have brought himself to use so trite and banal a figure as that is not to be comprehended; is Oxford in distress capable of achieving a bourgeois simile?)

Toward the end you see them in a moment full of desperate passion, of tragic irony. It was after one of their last quarrels, and she had crept late into his bed, where they lay in each other's arms "unquestioning, unexplaining, breast to breast with mingled breaths; yet they clasped between them a shadow that watched them. They could see it as they clasped and kissed,—the shadow of despair, daunting and cold. They hated it, seeing it so well, and for its despite they clasped closer. . . They were violent, they were anxious; but in their extremity, at the crest of their delight,

when speech ceded to murmurs, a doom hung over their achieved embrace. It was the love-making of two people who did not love each other any more. . . .”

It was not long after this that even their desire for one another died. Their passion became merely a traditional gesture. She, who had given what she could, knew that he had never been her companion—that now he was not even her mate. She realized that, and said to herself: “I’m all alone.” You end by hoping that Huncote’s tutelage had not led her quite to that point of cultural adventure where she must have encountered Mr. Yeats and his *Shadowy Waters*, and that she was spared the reading of that bitter, that desperately myopic, plaint of Forgael’s:

The love of all under the light of the sun
Is but brief longing, and deceiving hope,
And bodily tenderness. . . .

The beautiful, betraying rhetoric could hardly have compensated to her for the sorrowful aptness with which it might have seemed to her to explain her case.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.